

Leaky is the roof that wears out over the crown; British palaces need work

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.28.15

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Tourists flock to Buckingham Palace, the official London residence of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, June 24, 2015. Photo: AP Photo/Alastair Grant

LONDON, England — Queen Elizabeth II and members of the British Parliament reign and rule over Britain, but now there's a plague on both their houses -- literally.

Moisture, mice and moth-eaten heating and electrical systems are turning Buckingham Palace for her and the Palace of Westminster for them into something of a nightmare.

A Royal Pain

Conditions inside the buildings have become so dire that they threaten to achieve what the Nazi bombing of London during World War II could not. They might force Her Majesty and the members of Parliament to leave, at least during renovation.

Engineers warn of an urgent need to remove asbestos, a fireproofing material that can cause lung disease if particles get into the air. Other needs include better plumbing, pest control, upgraded wiring and improved fire safety. The palaces also need repairs to crumbling masonry. A large chunk of it came perilously close to nailing Princess Anne's car after falling from a Buckingham Palace wall in 2007.

But spending billions in taxpayer money on nicer accommodation for politicians and the royal family can be a tough sell anytime. It's even harder to convince the public at a time when the government is promising the deepest cuts in programs for the poor in at least a generation. Plenty of Brits believe that their elected representatives, as well as their unelected royals, have spent a little too much on themselves with public money.

Queen-Sized Repair Bill

To Dickie Arbiter, that's a shortsighted view.

"All these are government buildings," said Arbiter. He spent a dozen years toiling within the elegant confines of Buckingham Palace as Elizabeth's press secretary before retiring. "Our children and grandchildren and their children won't thank us if we allow these buildings to fall into a state of disrepair."

He scoffs at suggestions that his former boss, one of the world's richest women, ought to fund her own home improvements. The queen does not actually own Buckingham Palace; it's held "in trust" for use by the reigning monarch.

"There are those cynics who say, 'Well, the queen lives there, she should pay for it' which is a bit like saying, 'Obama lives at the White House, let him take care of it,'" Arbiter said.

A 240-Bedroom Fixer-Upper

Regardless of who foots the bill, the price tag would be enormous.

Buckingham Palace is basically a 240-bedroom, 78-bathroom fixer-upper (great location!) that would cost an estimated \$230 million to bring up to modern standards. Some redecorating is definitely in order. For all its luxurious trappings, the last time the interiors were spruced up was around the time of the queen's coronation. That was 62 years ago.

Royal servants have had to set out buckets to catch water dripping from the roof where Elizabeth's priceless art collection is kept.

Across St. James' Park, a makeover for the Palace of Westminster would cost significantly more. According to an independent report released in June, the project could run from \$5.4 billion to \$8.8 billion.

Mark Tami, a member of Parliament from the Liverpool area, said a “major intervention” is clearly necessary.

Parliament Is A Mess

“You’re talking about a building which is in the center of London, which is exposed to the elements and pollution,” he said. “There comes a point where just the odd patching here and there won’t suffice.”

The roof leaks, the pipes are corroding and much of the communication cabling is inadequate for the demands of the digital age. It took “quite a time” to install broadband and Wi-Fi, Tami said; connection speeds remain uneven.

Tami sits on a parliamentary committee that is expected to decide early next year whether to renovate plans.

The least expensive option would require Parliament to move out of the Palace of Westminster for six years.

The most expensive option would allow the 650 members of the House of Commons and assorted members of the House of Lords mostly to stay put. There would be partial closures of the building over 32 years.

"It'll Cause A Stink"

But despite its \$8.8 billion cost, the plan would only cover retrofitting the palace to minimum standards, including better access for the disabled and improved fire prevention. Lawmakers would also have to endure the racket and disruption that any homeowner who has ever done a renovation is all too familiar with.

Convincing the public of the merits of any of the choices will be a challenge. Although many Britons relish the idea of politicians being driven out of their offices, they would be less keen to know it was part of an overall scheme to provide them with more lavish public housing.

“If you want to have an efficient government, if you want our representatives do a proper job, they need to have a proper workplace,” said Steven Fielding. He is a political scientist at the University of Nottingham.

“The way it’ll probably end up is they’ll spend the money, it’ll cause a stink and it’ll be filed in the back of people’s memories as, ‘This is another reason why we don’t like them,’” Fielding said.

History, Symbolism, Tourists

Other suggestions have been made. One includes taking Parliament on the road with stops around the country, while another is ditching the Palace of Westminster altogether for a more modern, more modest facility.

Those alternatives are about as likely as the queen laying down her crown. For all the money that fixing up the two palaces would require, their historical and symbolic value is beyond price for this tradition-loving nation.

Plus, they bring in tourists, who pay \$28 to visit the Houses of Parliament and \$32 to gawk at Buckingham Palace's staterooms.

"Buckingham Palace symbolizes the institution of monarchy," said Arbiter, whose recent memoir, "On Duty With the Queen," records his years in service to the crown.

Quiz

- 1 This article illustrates the divided opinions on renovating Buckingham and Westminster palaces in all of the following ways EXCEPT:
- (A) by quoting supporters of the renovations
 - (B) by explaining the reasons for the renovations
 - (C) by comparing the cost of repairs and demolition of the buildings
 - (D) by highlighting the historic and cultural importance of the buildings

- 2 Based on the section "History, Symbolism, Tourists," which of the following statements is most likely TRUE?
- (A) Rather than repairing Westminster Palace, Parliament will move to a more modern, smaller facility.
 - (B) Because of the excessive cost, Parliament will pass new taxes to fund the renovations.
 - (C) Despite the high cost of the repairs, the symbolic significance of the buildings will ensure that they are repaired.
 - (D) Despite their historic significance, the buildings will be demolished because they are too expensive to repair.

- 3 Read the excerpt from the section "A 240-Bedroom Fixer-Upper."

Buckingham Palace is basically a 240-bedroom, 78-bathroom fixer-upper (great location!) that would cost an estimated \$230 million to bring up to modern standards. Some redecorating is definitely in order. For all its luxurious trappings, the last time the interiors were spruced up was around the time of the queen's coronation.

Which of the answer choices is an antonym for "luxurious" as it is used in the above excerpt?

- (A) imposing
- (B) moderate
- (C) ostentatious
- (D) sumptuous

4 Read the excerpt from the section "A Royal Pain."

The palaces also need repairs to crumbling masonry. A large chunk of it came perilously close to nailing Princess Anne's car after falling from a Buckingham Palace wall in 2007.

Which of the following words could replace "perilously" as it is used in the above excerpt?

- (A) carelessly
- (B) alarmingly
- (C) recklessly
- (D) trivially

Answer Key

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